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The Potential of Collective Impact: Moving the Work of Literacy Coalitions Forward

**Reviewed by Terry S. Atkinson and Kimberly L. Anderson
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Frank Ridzi and Margaret Doughty, *Does Collective Impact Work? What Literacy Coalitions Tell Us*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Publishing, 2017, 261 pages. ISBN: 978-1-498508-45-2.

Introduction

Amidst the growing realization that it takes a community-wide effort to bring about substantive and long-term changes in the literacy status of its citizenry, more than 300 literacy coalitions have formed in the U.S. since the 1980s. While literacy coalitions may vary somewhat in focus and/or scope, a common feature is the organization of community stakeholders to promote, enhance, and coordinate accessibility of literacy opportunities for community members. In our own community, coalition members have organized around the common goal of substantially increasing the number of children who read on grade-level by the end of third grade, with an agenda focused on providing rich early literacy resources and learning opportunities for all children. Our work with the organizers of this coalition over the past two years has immersed us in the complexities of getting such a collective impact effort off the ground and moving forward. Even with early consensus about a goal in place, determining a plan for achieving it through the collective actions of many has proven to be a much more challenging feat than we had anticipated.

Upon reading and reflecting on *Does Collective Impact Work? What Literacy Coalitions Tell Us*, we gained valuable insights that could have guided us to avoid potholes and detours along the way had we discovered this book earlier. Beyond improving our hindsight, however, Frank Ridzi and Margaret Doughty also help to focus our vision for the future, particularly with regard to moving toward best practices and measuring impact. We expect that others will conclude the same, ranging from those with an interest in: (1) learning about or establishing literacy coalitions, or (2) the general notion of collective impact, an approach to solving complex social problems through structured multi-sector collaboration. Ridzi and Doughty speak from decades of collective impact coalition leadership and the creation of a peer learning network (Literacy Funders

Network) to share collective impact data, examples, resources, and understandings. While Ridzi and Doughty are credited as primary authors, the book embodies collective impact across many boundaries, including significant contributions by a variety of individuals representing foundations, non-profits, policy centers, agencies, networks, and other groups reflecting years of investment in supporting community collaboration efforts.

Overview

This book offers a deep examination of literacy coalitions as one example of collective impact community coalitions. In making the case for focusing specifically on literacy coalitions, the authors note that these can be considered “lynchpin coalitions” given that most social problems are related to literacy in some way. Moreover, focusing on one specific field allows the authors to draw valid conclusions about collective impact efforts that ruled out differences in impact and structure attributable more to variance in goals, rather than the nature of the collaborative community efforts to attain them. Four questions unify the book’s content and provide the focus for its chapters: (1) What do typical coalitions look like?, (2) How do funders across the country regard coalitions?, (3) What evidence exists to document that coalitions have impact?, and (4) What emerging best practices might guide coalitions to be more effective?

The book’s introduction describes community coalitions as a national civic engagement movement growing significantly since 2000. Bolstered by the belief that coordinating cross-sector efforts has greater potential to result in large-scale social change than the siloed attempts made by individual groups, collective impact coalitions typically exhibit several key conditions for success identified by Kania and Kramer (2011). These include a common agenda, a centralized organizational structure and staff, a system of shared measurement, ongoing and regular communication, and activities that are coordinated and

support the efforts of others involved. The notion of collective impact is not new, as evidenced by our national history of grassroots social movements such as the rise of labor unions, farm workers' rallies, or women's suffrage movements. While collective impact community coalitions and social movements both seek to bring about change, they differ in that coalition efforts are typically organized by community leaders who define success through specific impact measures from the outset. Social movements, on the other hand, tend to arise from grassroots groups that seek social or political change.

In considering an overview of previous coalition research, the authors document that the literature has been dominated by case studies, rich with detail, but lacking in generalizability to other communities or circumstances. In Chapters One through Three, the authors look across many literacy coalition cases to: (1) identify how coalitions form, structure themselves, accomplish sustainability and engage with funders, and (2) determine whether communities with coalitions are better situated than those without. Through brief descriptions of a variety of coalitions, the authors make the case that the value coalitions can bring to their communities goes well beyond the programs they run, to the bringing together of multiple stakeholders in an ongoing and structured way. These collaborations themselves are an important outcome, as they make future collaborations around different problems more likely. Chapter Four addresses the quantitative gap in coalition literature by providing an in-depth analysis of the first-ever national coalition database (Literacy Funders Network). In considering data from more than 50 coalitions, prominent coalition theories evident in extant case study literature are used to frame multiple factors associated with better comprehensive performance and outcomes. Of note is Butterfoss's Community Coalition Action Theory (2007), suggested as an exemplary logic model for how coalitions should function and be structured. Using this model as a framework, the authors conclude that longer sustained coalition viability, success in increasing community resources, and accomplishing changes in local policies or systems are relatively consistent markers of coalition success. Nevertheless, they caution that continuing research is needed in order to paint a broader picture of best practices and promising impact. In proposing future direction, it is recommended that existing and emerging coalitions

invest heavily in data infrastructure to document and measure impact, and that future researchers seek data sets from coalitions with track records of ten or more years.

The book's conclusion suggests promising future possibilities for multi-sector community-wide collaborations. Meant to ameliorate intractable social problems such as poverty, low-literacy, or inequity in health service access, notable collective impact efforts of the past are leading to more strategic and informed current collaborative interventions to amplify what individual partners or organizations might do alone. As suggested by Bradley and Katz (2013), complex social problems that have become entrenched over long periods of time rarely have simple solutions. Thus, community leaders have become increasingly aware that launching and supporting collective impact coalitions have much greater potential for creating substantive change than searching for individual heroes or silver bullets. Looking to and learning from past cases, such as those featured in this book, can provide helpful guidelines to ensure longer-term coalition success. Some examples include broadening and deepening revenue streams, linking key community partners and infrastructure, and identifying individuals with the grit, tenacity, and passion to lead coalition efforts. Last, consistent with the collective impact notion of benefitting from the synergy of others, the authors recommend that a coalition's base of support and collaboration can be broadened through affiliation with an alliance of like-minded coalitions.

Featured throughout the book as an example of one firmly established alliance, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (CGLR) is bolstered by the reputable sponsorship of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The CGLR represents a national collaboration among states, government agencies, foundations, non-profits, business leaders, and communities focused on increasing the number of students in a community who read proficiently by third grade. CGLR has contributed significantly to increased numbers of community coalition efforts since its inception in 2010 by offering resources, direction, and structure to more than 300 communities across the United States. Standing on the shoulders of others, such as a network like CGLR or experts like Ridzi and Doughty, can jumpstart efforts to launch and sustain collective impact community coalitions. The authors offer convincing data and a wealth of resources for planning and implementation that can potentially lead

to promising collective impact ventures well worth the pursuit.

After reading and discussing this book with members of our local early literacy coalition, our work and insight has benefited from Ridzi and Doughty's broad analysis of literacy coalitions across the past thirty years. Their conclusions have helped us value the potential of connecting and coordinating existing community partners, rather than launching forward with new models and initiatives. Further, this book has served and will continue to serve as a valuable resource as our literacy coalition's collective impact work moves forward. In reaching out to many of the individuals and organizations mentioned in this book, our efforts have been supported in ways we could have never achieved alone. Communities wishing to achieve sustainable, long-term results will likely find the chapters equally rich with important information and unlimited potential for learning more.

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